

Ask Victoria Beckham

By Umm Rashid

Ask Victoria Beckham today whether she believes segregation of the sexes is a good thing, and chances are, she'll say yes.

The famous English footballer David Beckham ("Becks" to fans and tabloids) is facing allegations that he cheated on his wife with his "interpreter", Rebecca Loos. And his wife -- "Posh" from the erstwhile pop music group *Spice Girls* -- is said to be devastated. The interpreter in question-- a good-looking, young woman who speaks several languages was assigned as an aide to the sports star, when he shifted base from England to Spain after switching teams from Manchester United to Real Madrid.

When I read the "news" -- and really, there's no escaping it -- I found myself thinking, how come there weren't any *male* interpreters? Why was it necessary to have an attractive young, female working in such close proximity with the football star, accompanying him to late-night parties and shopping sprees -- especially when his wife had allegedly expressed her unhappiness on seeing her husband's aide and "warned" him to stay away from her? Haven't SFX, the sports company that employed Loos, heard of chemistry?

Even more telling were the comments by columnists on the "affair". The common theme seemed to be that Victoria should have known better, marriages don't work in a vacuum and she should have left her children to the tender mercies of household help and a nanny to be with her husband; that when the wife's away men will play. The verdict was out -- a single fling is "only symptomatic of a problem" in the couple's relationship -- a little wrinkle in the fabric of married life that could be neatly ironed out. Unless Beckham had a series of such flings --that is turned into a serial cheat in tabloidspeak --their marriage wasn't classifiable as a disaster.

Never mind the fact that Victoria Beckham had reminisced in an interview about being "dumped" in an earlier relationship and confessed that she would be heartbroken and shattered if her husband ever cheated on her -- even if it were only a one-time affair. Never mind the fact that even a single fling legally constitutes adultery.

Ever notice how no one uses the a-word anymore? We have a plethora of modern synonyms for extra-marital man-woman relationships, -- affair, fling, one-night stand, -- but not adultery. Never that. Because to use that archaic word brings back the memory of ancient commandments consigned to the dustbin of public memory. *Thou shall not ...* does that ring a bell?

Adultery is considered a major sin in *all* religions.

Islaam: Approach not adultery: for it is a shameful deed and an evil, opening the road to other evils. *Qur'aan 17.32*

Judaism: "We find that to every sin God is long-suffering, except to the sin of unchastity. Rabbi Azariah said, "All things can God overlook save lewdness"
"Midrash, Leviticus Rabbah 23.9

Christianity: Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and the adulterous.

Hebrews 13.4

Hinduism: A man should not think incontinently of another's wife, much less address her to that end; for such a man will be reborn in a future life as a creeping insect. He who commits adultery is punished both here and hereafter; for his days in this world are cut short, and when dead he falls into hell. *Vishnu Purana 3.11*

Sikhism: The philanderer lusting after numerous women does not give up seeking in others' homes. What he does daily only brings regrets - In sorrow and greed he is shriveled up. *Adi Granth, Dhanasari, M.5, p. 672*

Buddhism: Both learning and the practice of the Teaching are lost to him who is given to (unlawful) sexual intercourse. He employs himself wrongly. That is what is ignoble in him. *Sutta Nipata 815*

Jainism: A wise man has nothing to do with lust. Lust is nothing but death, and lack of it is serenity. How can one who perceives this indulge in wanton behavior? *Acarangasutra 2.61*

Taoism: Do not approach thy neighbor's wife or maids. *Tract of the Quiet Way*

Yet, going by the frequency with which it occurs today and the consequent social acceptability it has earned, one would be forced to second guess the scriptures. Going by the movies, TV sitcoms and magazines that adopt adultery as their main Muse, an adulterous relationship is a harmless exercise in variety, a notch up in a man's Casanova Quotient.

On the other hand, newspapers are replete with reports of adultery and its horrific consequences: husbands and wives murdering or maiming their spouses after discovering that they were being cheated on. People committing suicide, parents killing their offspring, single-parent families, abandoned spouses, the angst of children looking for their biological fathers well into adulthood.

Clearly, *someone's* conning the masses into believing that adultery is commonplace in the scale of sins, that referring to it in cutesy sound-bites lessens its gravity in the scheme of things.

It couldn't be G-d, Who deems adultery a sin grievous enough to be punishable by death. The Bible decrees the death sentence for both the adulterer and the adulteress:

"If a man is found sleeping with another man's wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel" (Deut. 22:22). "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death" (Lev. 20:10).

The Bible only deems the extra-marital relationship of a *married* woman adulterous (*Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22, Proverbs 6:20-7:27*). If a married man has sexual relations with an unmarried woman, he is not considered an adulterer. The rationale behind this according to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* is that the woman is considered to be her husband's possession and adultery constitutes a violation of the husband's exclusive right to her. (The wife as the husband's possession had no such right to him).

Even today in Israel, if a married man indulges in an extramarital affair with an unmarried woman, his children by that woman are considered legitimate. But, if a married woman has an affair with another man (whether married or unmarried) the children are not only illegitimate but are forbidden to marry any other Jews. This ban is continues for upto 10 generations of the children's descendants, until the "taint of adultery" is presumably weakened.

Islaamic laws also prescribe punishment for adultery – however, both the adulterer and the adulteress are included in it.

"The woman and the man guilty of illegal sexual intercourse, flog each of them with a hundred stripes. Let not pity withhold you in their case, in a punishment prescribed by Allaah, if you believe in Allaah and the Last Day. And let a party of the believers witness their punishment." (24:2).

[This punishment is for unmarried persons guilty of the above crime, if married persons commit it, the punishment is to stone them to death.]

A companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Abdullah ibn Umar narrates:

The Jews brought to the Prophet a man and a woman from among them who had committed illegal sexual intercourse. The Prophet said to them, "How do you usually punish the one amongst you who has committed illegal sexual intercourse?" They replied, "We blacken their faces with coal and beat them." He said, "Don't you find the order of Ar-Rajm (i.e. stoning to death) in the Torah?" They replied, "We do not find anything in it." 'Abdullah bin Salam (a Jewish rabbi who was a prominent convert to Islaam) (after hearing this conversation) said to them, "You have told a lie! Bring here the Torah and recite it if you are truthful." (So the Jews brought the Torah). And the religious teacher who was teaching it to them, put his hand over the verse of Ar-Rajm and started reading what was written above and below the place hidden with his hand, but he did not read the Verse of Ar-Rajm. 'Abdullah bin Salam removed his (i.e. the teacher's) hand from the Verse of Ar-Rajm and said, "What is this?" So when the Jews saw that Verse, they said, "This is the Verse of Ar-Rajm." So the Prophet ordered the two adulterers to be stoned to death, and they were stoned to death near the place where biers used to be placed near the Mosque. [Saheeh Bukhari 6:49]

To come back to the question, if G-d has decreed adultery a crime punishable by death, *who* makes it tempting in our eyes? *Who* persuades us to sacrifice the sanctity of marriage to a few moments of pleasure? *Who* whispers to us to ignore the magnitude of its repercussions on our souls, our lives and those of our loved ones? The Prophet Muhammad explicitly named this Other:

"If a man and a woman are alone in a room, Satan is the third."

Based on the logic that The One who created us knows more about our nature than we do ourselves, Islaam lays down certain rules for interaction between the sexes. It advocates modesty and lowering the gaze, it discourages enticing speech and encourages segregation of the sexes except under conditions of necessity. The Qur'aan says:

"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! God is Aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers... or children who know naught of women's nakedness. And let

them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto God together, O believers, in order that ye may succeed.” [24.30-3]

One would think this makes perfect sense...then why is the idea of segregating sexes so vehemently opposed? Mention segregation and stereotypes loom large: of repressed women caged in houses, unable to venture outdoors except at the whims of the male. That's not how Islaam envisaged segregation, that's not how it was practiced in the time of the early Muslims.

Muslim women participated in the lives of their men in a manner befitting the dignity accorded to them by Islaam. They participated in wars and debates, in social festivals and market administration – all the while screening themselves from strange eyes and satanic intents.

During the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime the punishment for adultery was meted out only *thrice* – because there was no need for it. Everyone understood the rules and played by them. Segregation by itself was not a means to attaining freedom from sin, submitting to the ethics of male-female interaction as envisaged by our Creator was.

To make not too subtle a point, if David Beckham's interpreter in Spain was a *man*, none of the scandal would have happened. He wouldn't be spewing denials and swearing fidelity all over the press. His wife wouldn't be going through the heartache and humiliation that news of his alleged affair and the exposure of intimate mobile texts that he sent Loos has brought..

Imagine...a world where women and men are free to bond with others of their sex on the basis of sisterhood or brotherhood alone, where the concept of catfights and alpha male behaviour, sexual rivalry and sexual jealousy doesn't exist.

Is that a bad thing? Ask Victoria Beckham.